

THE FEDERAL PAGE

Whistle-Blower Gives Gore An Earful

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The vice president met the whistle-blower yesterday. Live, with cameras rolling and about 300 Agriculture Department employees watching.

Brad Benson of the Farmers Home Administration had held up his fist during Vice President Gore's opening remarks for a "reinventing government" session, and Gore, who noticed Benson's gesture, asked him to go first with an example of what's wrong with the government. Gore got an earful.

Benson said his agency had been involved in "massive wasteful practices" that included unneeded furniture purchases, and that some of it was still going on. Benson said when he had reported the misconduct to the department's inspector general, or IG, the IG office had turned on him.

He called on Gore to "freeze all these procurements . . . until they are validated as something absolutely necessary" and urged the creation of a whistle-blowers task force to investigate the IG's office to "find out what they have covered up for the last 12 years."

Although IGs are supposed to operate independently of their departments, Benson said it was clear to him that an "agency cannot investigate itself."

Benson was interrupted three times with loud applause from the employees gathered in the department's Atrium West Patio, and the crowd laughed when Gore responded, "Now I know why you raised your fist."

After hearing another employee endorse Benson's criticism of IGs, Gore said the relationship between IGs and workers is "clearly one thing we've got to fix."



Vice President Gore talks to employees at the Agriculture Department while walking through the department's cafeteria at the end of his visit.

The extraordinary encounter between a vice president and a whistle-blower kicked off a morning session at the Agriculture Department devoted to what Gore called "quality management"—treating taxpayers like customers and serving them efficiently and effectively.

Employing the "town meeting" format that had been tested during the 1992 campaign, Gore said he was there to listen to suggestions from federal workers on how to streamline the government and said that a small number of Agriculture employees would be asked to join his National Performance Review, which is examining programs and policies at every federal agency and will issue a report in September.

The crowd, which was friendly and enthusiastic, laughed loudly when Gore, acting almost like a talk-show host, asked if the bureaucracy had ever stifled their creativity or thwarted their ideas. "A lot of the time it is difficult to implement that idea because the organization as a whole doesn't want to hear it," Gore said. "That needs to be changed."

The session was televised live to department outposts and Gore fielded questions from federal workers in Missouri, Georgia, Wisconsin and Montana.

He finished the meeting by walking with Agriculture Secretary Mike Espy through the department cafeteria, crowded with about 800 employees who had watched on television monitors. As Gore worked his

way through the room, shaking hands, some employees, like Mable Gathers, didn't want to let go of the vice president's hand. She jokingly suggested that the two "do lunch."

Yesterday's plea by Benson underscores how hard it may be for the administration to change the bureaucratic culture.

Benson said he blew the whistle when he realized \$3.5 million would be spent on furniture in just two months at the end of a budget year. Then, Benson said, senior managers wrongly turned the IG probe into an investigation of him and "impugned my character."

Assistant IG Craig Beauchamp called it an "unfortunate perception" that many employees believe they will be compromised. "We really guard the confidentiality," he said.